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A South Arabian dedicatory inscription from the kingdom of Kaminahū[1]

This text dates from the beginnings of the South Arabian civilization. It provides new information on the cults and social organization of the first ancient kingdoms established in the region called today al-Jawf, in north-eastern Yemen.

The stele comes from Kaminahū, one of several cities-states situated along the Wādī Madhāb (the site is nowadays named Kamna) (figures 1, 2). The inscription can be dated to the end of the 8th or sometime in the 7th century BC. It was dedicated to the god ʿAthtar dhū-Raḥbah by the religious community of ʿAthtar, who seemingly claimed proprietorial rights over the divine domain. The interpretation of the text (partly obliterated) is difficult. It mentions the offering of first-fruits to the god as the guarantee of a pact and payment of a contract concerning a domain (possibly the domain of the gods).

The inscription refers to a decree of Nabaṭʿalī Dharihān son of Yashhurmalik – who was obviously king of Kaminahū – and of the "Community of Twelve". This king, whose name occurs here in full for the first time, could perhaps be a contemporary of the great sovereign of the kingdom of Sabaʾ, Karibʾil Watar son of Dhamarʿalī who reigned at the end of the 8th / the beginning of the 7th century BC. Indeed, Karibʾil Watar mentions in his inscription a Nabaṭʿalī, king of Kaminahū to whom he made a gift of territory and an irrigation system which he had taken from his enemy, the king of Nashshān. We would suggest that the Nabaṭʿalī mentioned in our inscription could be Nabaṭʿalī, king of Kaminahū, ally of the Sabaean sovereign Karibʾil Watar. If this hypothesis is correct, we would need to reconsider our chronology of the kings of Kaminahū.

The decree was issued not only by the king of Kaminahū, but also by the "Community of Twelve" or "Council of Twelve" (*ʾhl ṯny ʿs²rn*) which apparently was a religious institution comparable to those of other cities-states situated along the wādī Madhāb.

The decision was finally consecrated by the authority of the gods belonging to the pantheon of Kaminahū:[2] Nabʿal, ʿAthtar dhū-Raḥbah and Madahwū.[3] It seems that they were worshipped almost exclusively in the kingdom of Kaminahū.[4]

Inscription Kamna 26

In 2004 the stele was a part of a private collection.

Description

Limestone stele with an inscription of 17 lines (lines 4-6 and the beginning of line 7 have been obliterated). The upper part is decorated with an ornament of "denticles". On the right and on the left of the inscription run two strips of cartouches with recumbent ibexes. In the lower part there is a symbol on each side.

Dimensions

H: 102 cm. W: 53 cm.
Height of the letters (of the first line): 4.4 cm.

Graphic style

B1 of J. Pirenne, like *RÉS* 3945
(though the latter is in boustrophedon).

1. This inscription was presented by Iwona Gajda at the conference "Rencontres sabéennes" 9, at the Fridrich-Schiller University of Jena, 25-27 May 2005. As it was also studied by Mohammed Maraqten, we have decided to publish it together. We would like to express our gratitude to Michael Macdonald for correcting the English.
2. Robin 1992, I, pp. 165-166.
3. According to an inscription published by Ch. J. Robin, Madahwū is probably a god, not a goddess (Robin 2002, pp. 198, 200).
4. The name of ʿAthtar with the epithet dhū-Raḥbah appears also in one inscription from Haram (Haram 12/12-13).

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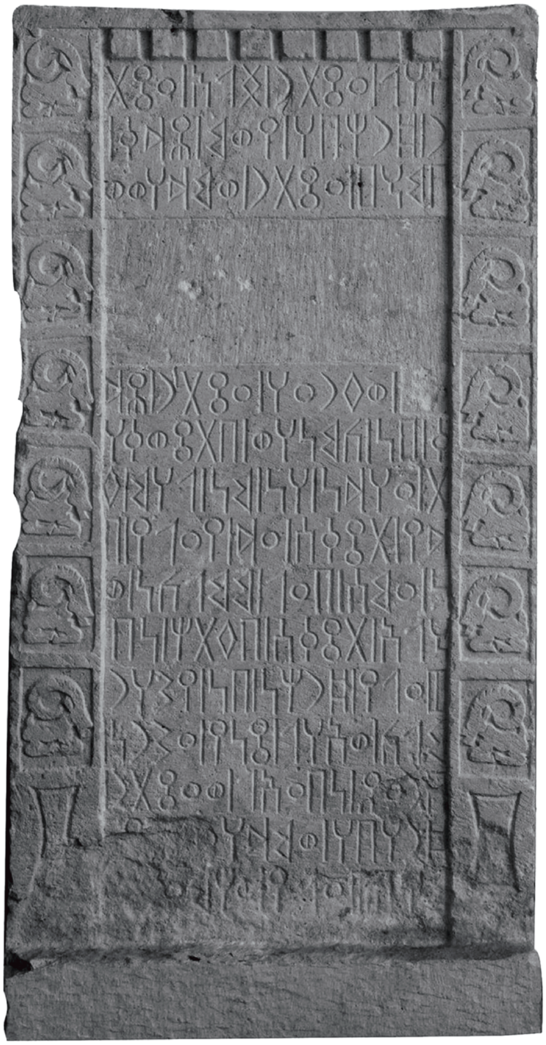


Figure 1 - The stele from Kamna / *Kaminahū* (al-Jawf, north-eastern Yemen).

Transcription

1 *ʾhl / ʿṯtr / s^{3}lʾ / ʿṯt*
2 *r / ḏ-Rḥbh / ywm / ṣdq /*
3 *b-mḫḍ / ʿṯtr / w-Mdhww*
lacuna (three lines and the beginning of the fourth obliterated)
7 *... / w-frʿh / ʿṯtr / ṣd*
8 *q / bn / Kmnhw / b-ṯṯwqh*
9 *t / ʿhdn / hn / mn / lhm / f*
10 *dy / ṯṯq-s^{1} / ʿd / yʿly / b*
11 *n / ʿm-s^{1} / bʿl / mmlkn / w-*
12 *ḫlʾ / ṯṯq-s^{1} / b-ftḥ / Nb*
13 *ṭʿly / Ḏrḥn / bn / Ys^{2}hr*
14 *mlk / w-ʾhl / ṯny / ʿs^{2}rn*
15 *b-rʿẓ / Nbʿ{ʾ}l / w-ʿṯtr*
16 *ḏ-R{h}bh / w-Mdh(w)[w.](y)[.*
17 *.]Nbṭʿly / w(h)m(ʿ)[..*

Translation

1 The Community of ʿAthtar has dedicated to ʿAthtar
2 dhū-Raḥbah, when they claimed proprietorial rights (?)
3 over the domain of ʿAthtar and Madahwū
lacuna (three lines and the beginning of the fourth obliterated)
7 ...] and the first-fruits of ʿAthtar duly bestowed
8 on behalf of Kaminahū as guarantee
9 of the pact <according to which (?)> if whosoever does not redeem
10 his obligation (contract) until
11 the master of the domain frees him (from his debt),
12 his contract will be withdrawn from him according to the decree of
13 Nabaṭʿalī Dhariḥān son of Yashhurmalik
14 and the Community of Twelve,
15 with the authority of Nabʿal and ʿAthtar
16 dhū-Raḥbah and Madahwū ... ?
17 Nabaṭʿalī and ..... ?

Commentary

l. 1, *ʾhl / ʿṯtr*: seems to refer to a religious community connected to the god ʿAthtar rather than a clan, compare with *ʾhl / ṯny / ʿs^{2}rn*, "Community of Twelve" at the l. 14.

l. 2-3, *ṣdq b-*: this verb should probably be rendered here as "claim proprietorial rights over" as in Sabaic (cf. the *DS*, and Bron 2010, p. 44). The formula *ṣdq / b-... b-ftḥ...* (l. 2-3, 12) appears also in the inscription YM 18352 (cf. the interpretation of this inscription in Bron 2010, p. 44). Fr. Bron compares this text with the inscription Gl 1563/6-7, where a claim of proprietorial rights is justified "by the decree of the Council of ʿAraratum" (*b-ftḥ / ms^{3}wd / ʿrrtm*). Obviously we have here the same type of formula.

l. 3, *mḫḍ*: in this context the sense "the domain of" or "the territory of" or "the property of" seems the most appropriate (compare Maʿīn 1/4, 5, 6).

l. 7, *w-frʿ-h*: the termination *h*, characteristic of the Minaic language (see for instance Beeston 1984, § M 2:10; Arbach 1993, I, p. 40), here follows a noun in the construct *frʿ*.

l. 8-11, *b-ṯṯwqht / ʿhdn / hn / mn / lhm / fdy / ṯṯq-s^{1} / ʿd / yʿly / bn / ʿm-s^{1} / bʿl / mmlkn*: the interpretation of this passage is difficult.

l. 8, *b-ṯṯwqht*: a preposition *b-* followed by a feminine noun *ṯṯwqht* coming from the root WṮQ. This supposes a metathesis W / Ṯ. The stem would be *tfʿlt*, with a

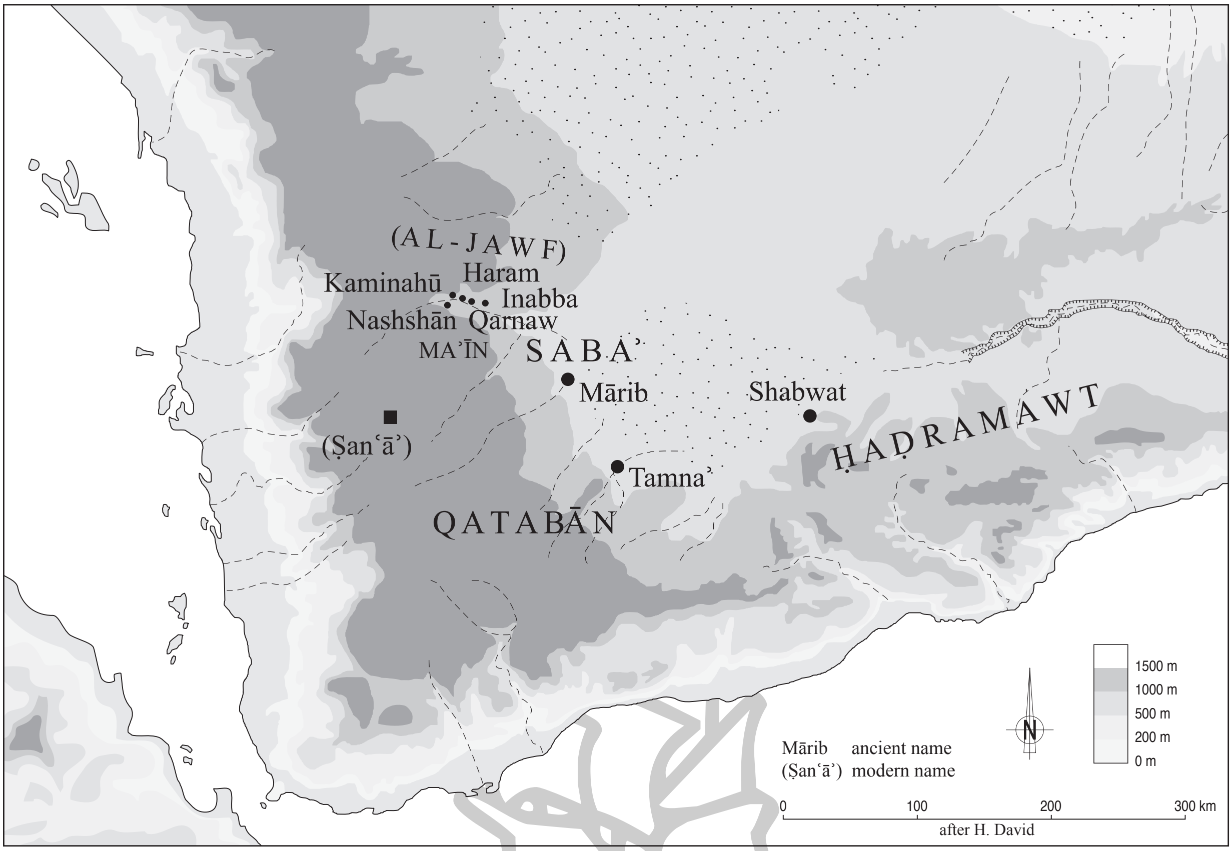


Figure 2 - Southern Arabia in the first half of the last millenium BC.

phonetic (non-etymological) *h* before the termination *t*. It could be rendered as "consolidation" or "guarantee".

l. 9, *ʿhdn*: this noun occurs for the first time in Minaic. The root ʿHD is well attested. We translate it as "pact, covenant".

hn : conj. "because", "if".
mn: relative pronoun "whosoever".
lhm: particle "not".
fdy: in Minaic the noun *fdyt*, "redemption (of debt)" is well attested (ARBACH 1993, I, p. 32). In Sabaic the verb *fdy* means "pay (money); redeem (a debt)", "redeem, release (from obligations)", see the *SD* and also ROBIN 1982, II, pp. 49-50.

l. 10, *ṯṯq-s¹*: the -*s¹* is an attached pronoun; the noun *ṯṯq* derives from the root WṮQ (see also the line 12). We suggest translating it as "obligation" or "contract". The word *ṯṯq* occurs once in a Minaic inscription from Barāqish, M 305 = *RÉS* 3326 ((1) *ṯṯq / ʿṯtr* (2) *yhrq / nḫl* (3) */ ḏʾb / ḏydʿ*). The *RÉS* proposed taking it as a verb: "il a voué (?) à Athtar Yahriq la palmeraie de Dhiʾb Dhū-Yadʿa". In Arabic, the root WṮQ, in the V stem, means also "s'assurer de l'obéissance, de la fidélité de quelqu'un en le liant par un pacte, un serment" or "se rendre garant de quelqu'un, répondre de lui", the noun *waṯīqa* means "acte, contrat, titre, obligation" (DOZY 1967, II, pp. 779-780).

yʿly: probably a verb in the imperfect from the root ʿLY. The verb *yʿly* occurs also in an inscription from al-Bayḍāʾ (ancient Nashq), CIH 603b/22.

l. 11, *ʿm-s¹*: probably the preposition *ʿm* followed by a personal pronoun -*s¹*.

l. 12, *ḫlʾ*: v. the root is attested once in a Minaic inscription from al-ʿUlā, M 355/9 (*s¹ḫlʾ*: "abandon"?).

The verb *ḫlʾ* appears in a Sabaic inscription Robin Kāniṭ 4//5 (where Chr. Robin has compared it to the Arabic *ḫalaʾ*, "quitter une chose et se mettre à une autre" and has translated it as "rendre"). In our inscription the verb *ḫlʾ* could perhaps be compared rather to the Arabic *ḫalā*: "be, become free from fault or from the thing, affair" (Lane 1863-1893, 2, p. 803), II and III form: "leave, abandon, let go" (*ibid*., p. 804); another sense of this verb is "laisser, quitter", "se défaire de" (Dozy 1967, I, p. 401). The passage *w-ḫlʾ / ṯṯq-s^1* could be translated: "he will be released from his obligation". We would suggest that another interpretation is possible: "his contract will be withdrawn from him". This seems more probable in this context.

ftḥ : n. "decree" often attested (see Arbach 1993, I, p. 34); in Sabaic "judicial order" or "lawsuit, litigation" (according to the *DS*).

l. 14, *ʾhl / ṯny / ʿs^{2}rn*: "the Community of Twelve" or "the Council of Twelve", compare the inscription M 242 = B-M 267 from Barāqish: *ḏ-ṯny ʿs^{2}r w-ḏ-q(hl)t ʿṯtr ḏ-Y(h)r[q*, "(member) of the Twelve and of the assembly of ʿAthtar dhū-Yuharī[q" and the inscription from the Museum of the University of Ṣanʿāʾ no. 207/1: *ḏ-ṯny ʿs^{2}rh Nkrḥ^m* "the Twelve of Nakraḥum".[5]

l. 15, *Nbʿ{ʾ}l*: probably a mistake of the stonemason. The usual spelling of this divine name is *Nbʿl*.

l. 16, *ḏ-R{h}bh* : another mistake of the stonemason. In other inscriptions the divine epithet reads *ḏ-Rḥbh*.

A part of the inscription has been carefully erased. The reason for this could be either a modification of the pact mentioned later in the text or an error of the stonemason, a possibility which should be considered since he made two mistakes in lines 15 and 16.

The symbol in the lower part of the decorative strips on each side of the inscription represents probably the god ʿAthtar or Madahwū or both. It appears as the symbol of the god Madahwū in a penitential inscription from Kaminahū.[6] The same symbol representing the Minaic god ʿAthtar dhū-Qabḍ occurs in Qarnaw (today Maʿīn).[7]

5. See the photograph of this inscription on the front cover of the periodical *Al-Yaman al-Ğadīd* 15/1, January 1968 [should be 1986].
6. The inscription YM 10886 (Robin 2002, pp. 197-201, fig. 8).
7. Grohmann 1914, pp. 52-54, Bron 1998, p. 32 The symbol appears also, accompanied by a symbol resembling the South Arabic letter *ḏ*, on four blocs of stone at the northern gate of the site of Maʿīn (see the inscription Maʿīn 32).

Nabaṭʿalī Dhariḥān son of Yashhurmalik

Nabaṭʿalī Dhariḥān son of Yashhurmalik is probably a king of Kaminahū. The full name of this king occurs here for the first time but it is possible that he is mentioned in other inscriptions as Nabaṭʿalī without the epithet or patronymic. The Sabaean *mukarrib*, Karibʾil Watar son of Dhamarʿalī declares in his long inscription, *RÉS* 3945/17 that, after destroying the city of Nashshān, he took away from Sumhuyafaʾ (who was king of Nashshān) and from Nashshān "the irrigation system of Malikwaqah", and gave a part of it to Nabaṭʿalī, king of Kaminahū.[8]

It has been suggested that the Nabaṭʿalī king of Kaminahū mentioned in *RÉS* 3945/17 could be identified with Nabaṭʿalī Amar son of Ilīsamiʿ known from two texts, al-Ḥarāshif 2 and Kamna 17 = *RÉS* 2849 bis, the latter being known only from the notes of Joseph Halévy. The graphic style of al-Ḥarāshif 2 is Pirenne's B3, slightly later than that of the inscriptions of Karibʾil Watar.

The graphic style of our inscription, Kamna 26 is Pirenne's B1, as is *RÉS* 3945. Thus, in our opinion, it is more likely that Nabaṭʿalī Dhariḥān son of Yashhurmalik should be identified with the Nabaṭʿalī mentioned in the inscription of Karibʾil, *RÉS* 3945/17.

Two recently published inscriptions from Kaminahū, YM 8871 and Ṣanʿāʾ 3630, refer to a Nabaṭʿalī, almost certainly a king of Kaminahū.[9] Christian Robin has proposed that this sovereign should be identified with the Nabaṭʿalī Amar son of Ilīsamīʿ known from al-Ḥarāshif 2 and Kamna 17 = *RÉS* 2849 bis, and considers him to have been a contemporary of the Sabaean *mukarrib* Karibʾil Watar.[10]

The Nabaṭʿalī mentioned in YM 8871 and Ṣanʿāʾ 3630 is probably the same king. However, from a palaeographic point of view, these two inscriptions differ considerably from al-Ḥarāshif 2 and seem to be more ancient.

The Nabatʿalī Dharihān son of Yashhurmalik mentioned in our inscription could, however, be identified with the Nabaṭʿalī in YM 8871 and Ṣanʿāʾ 3630, on the basis of the graphic styles of these three texts.

8. Cf. *RÉS* 3945/17: *w-s^{1}tmḫḍ / bn / S^{1}mhyfʿ / w-Ns^{2}n / ḥrrtn / ḏt / Mlkwqh / w-yhmḫḍ / Nbṭʿly / mlk / Kmnhw / w-Kmnhw / bn / ḥrrtn / ḏt / Mlkwqh / ln / ʾwṯn / wṯn / Krbʾl*: "(Karibʾil) took away from Sumhuyafaʿ and from Nashshān the irrigation system of Malikwaqah and handed over to Nabaṭʿalī, king of Kaminahū and to Kaminahū (the part) of the irrigation system of Malikwaqah starting from the boundary stones set by Karibʾil". For the interpretation of this passage see for instance Robin 1992, p. 157, Stein 2003, pp. 212 and 169, n. 80.
9. Robin 2002.
10. *Ibid,* p. 193.

The religious group and institution: the "Community of ʿAthtar", the "Community of Twelve"

The authors of this text present themselves as *ʾhl ʿṯtr*, the "Community of ʿAthtar". The mention of the *ʾhl ṯny ʿs²rn*, the "Community of Twelve", seems to refer to an institution linked to it (or even the same group). Apparently similar institutions composed of twelve members existed in relation to the god ʿAthtar dhū-Yuharīq in Barāqish and in relation to the god Nakraḥ worshipped in several cities of al-Jawf. It is possible that this type of religious community or council attached to a particular god was common in the cities of this region.

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Sigla of the inscriptions

al-Ḥarāshif: see Robin 1992.
Haram: see Robin 1992.
Kamna 1-22: see Robin 1992.
Maʿīn: see Bron 1988.
YM 18352: see Arbach, Audouin 2007, pp. 84-85; Bron 2010, p. 44.

Abbreviations

DS A.F.L. Beeston, M.A. Ghul, W.W. Müller, J. Ryckmans, Dictionnaire Sabéen (anglais-français-arabe), Publication of the University of Sanaa, YAR, Louvain-la-Neuve/Beyrouth, Peeters/Librairie du Liban, 1982.

RÉS *Répertoire d'Épigraphie Sémitique*, publié par la Commission du *Corpus Inscriptionum Semiticarum*, Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, t. V, VI, VII rédigés par G. Ryckmans, Paris, Imprimerie nationale, 1929, 1935 et 1950 ; t. VIII rédigé par J. Pirenne (tables et index des précédents), Paris, 1968.

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